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ENGL 6820

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Analyzing Wants Versus Needs in the Writing Center

Last year, as I was sitting in my living room doing my homework, my sister, Abby, started telling me about her experience in the Writing Center. She was encouraged from her visit because of the praise she had received, and she was excited to implement the advice she was given. However, when Abby got her grade for the paper, she was devastated. The grade she received was unacceptable, and she was confused. She went to the Writing Center, and shouldn't applying the few suggestions she was given help her get an A? The tutor gave Abby some suggestions laced with praise, which she wanted, but that is not what Abby needed. She needed to be asked searching questions to help her fix her own paper. If the tutor had tried to discern Abby's needs instead of just focusing on her wants, Abby would have been more satisfied with her Writing Center experience. As I have observed other tutors in the Writing Center and have tutored myself, I have come to realize that it is important for those of us who work in Writing Centers to be able to discern what our students need even if they don't know themselves. The ability to discover our students' needs will also help those of us who teach. Discerning needs can be done as we adapt to students, assess their needs, and strive to understand their assignments.

Adapting to students is vital because it helps us know the student better as we try to learn their needs and help them develop a successful paper. Typically, when I tutor students, they come in and tell me what they need help on, and then we go over their paper. Most of the time I try to ask them searching questions so they can come up with their own answers, but there are

also moments when I give them some ideas because they need it. However, there are exceptions to both of those cases, and I have to be able to deviate from my routine in order to help meet the student's needs. I had one student who just talked about her ideas during a session, and that was all she required. She just needed me to listen to her ideas and offer my insight when it was necessary, and we had a successful session. I saw a similar experience while I observing a brainstorming session. It was an incredible opportunity for me to see how the student and the tutor engaged with one another to come up with ideas for a paper. The tutor engaged with the topic which helped the tutor and the student connect. The connection allowed the tutor to adapt to the student's needs, and the tutoring session became a conversation where the student could come up with ideas and the tutor could respond and help them dig deeper. Adapting to students is incredibly important, and I have tried to implement that practice in my teaching as I respond to my students' papers. As I respond to student writing, I have to determine what would be the best advice for the students. Some of the advice is similar, but it is adapted to individual needs.

Throughout my observations, tutoring sessions, and teaching, I have learned the value of using assessment tools. During the first session I observed, I learned the value of asking questions and listening reflectively to assess students' needs. In that first session, the tutor was not allowed to ask certain questions because the Writing Center was conducting a study. It was interesting to see the interactions between the student and the tutor. It was still a good session, but I could tell the tutor was frustrated because he couldn't ask the student questions to truly understand what was needed. The student told the tutor what he wanted, but the lack of questions didn't allow the tutor to discern his needs. That session helped me understand the value of asking questions to make the session feel worthwhile. After that session, I strived to ask questions and listen reflectively to my students during tutoring sessions. During my tutoring sessions, I ask

students questions to help them dig deep so they can understand what they truly need, and then I rephrase what they said so we can make sure we truly understand each other. Reflective listening allows the students and me to make sure we fully utilize the few minutes we have together. I also strive to make sure my time in the classroom is used to its fullest. Listening to my student's ideas in class and responding to their insights helps me assess our time together to see if it has helped them reflect on their past experiences and understand how our discussions will help them in the future. I also ask my students if they feel like an activity or discussion helped them learn something so I can assess if I met their needs properly. I am there for the students in class and during tutoring sessions, and asking questions helps me know if I am effectively meeting their needs.

Effectiveness is crucial as I teach and tutor, and one way I can be effective and meet students' needs is by knowing the prompt and what goals the professor is trying to achieve when he or she gives assignments. One of the goals of the Writing Center is to make sure students are fulfilling their instructors' requirements which is why we clarify the assignment in the beginning of our sessions. Knowing the prompt is vital as we help students, and it was necessary in the brainstorming session I observed. In that session, the student could bounce ideas off the tutor, and the tutor could give relevant ideas because she was familiar with the assignment. This experience was similar to another session I observed. In that session, the tutor could give good insight because she knew the prompt. She could direct the student's thoughts so he could fulfill the assignment description, and she did it in a way that still allowed him to think for himself. She didn't give him all the answers, but led him on a journey to self-discovery. Knowing the assignment descriptions is important, but it is also important to know what the professor is looking for. While observing another session, the tutor knew the assignment description and was

able to help the student achieve the basic requirements of the prompt, but, as someone who teaches that course, I felt like she needed to tell the student to add more analysis to his paper. The content and flow of the paper was fine, but the assignment involves a lot of analysis that the student just didn't have. One of his needs wasn't met because the tutor didn't realize that analysis was more important than flow for this particular essay.

The ability to analyze a student's wants versus their needs is crucial in the tutoring and teaching realms. It is true that sometimes wants are needs, but we need to be able to tell the difference. If the tutor my sister was with had discerned her needs, Abby would have had a much better experience with the Writing Center. In that session, Abby needed questions that led to self-discovery, but she wanted praise with a couple suggestions, and that is what she received. It is vital for us, as tutors and teachers, to use our skills to adapt to students, use assessment tools, and deeply understand the assignments so we can truly meet the needs of our students. Students should have a good experience with the Writing Center, and the only way we can ensure that students have a good experience is by addressing their needs before their wants. It is important that we understand how crucial understanding student needs is so we can help them improve, because that is ultimately what the Writing Center is for. We need to give students something to work on so they can feel like they are becoming better writers instead of just telling them their paper is good. In order to aid students' development, we have to help students see their needs and give them ways to improve in the long-term so they can continue to learn.